

## Let's hear it for assistant clerks everywhere... !<sup>1</sup>

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Nobody quite knows what an assistant clerk does, or should do. It's the one question that always comes up on the Woodbrooke courses for new clerks. And of course the answer is that it can be absolutely anything – or nothing, if the clerk is independent minded and self-sufficient. So much depends on the relationship between the two Friends at the table. Assistant clerks are the most valuable people because they have to be so flexible. They might have to:

- Support a new, tentative clerk. How? Confidence building mostly, but also being eyes and ears and ready to make suggestions such as: 'Have you checked that Friend x really is expecting to give that report?' or 'I remember this time last year we asked the treasurer to do xx.' Offer to write (some) minutes or draft (some) minutes for clerks who prefer not to. You could do some of the detailed legwork (checking up on stuff, chasing - also more politely known as 'reminding') so that the clerk doesn't have to do *everything*; make notes for the clerk whether or not they turn out to be needed. Don't fuss them. Be the one to round Friends up after a shuffle break. It's good to be a second pair of eyes and ears beside the clerk. An assistant clerk who hasn't served as clerk often can't imagine just how comforting it is to have that other Friend next to them, whether they are called on to do anything or just be a supporting presence. Clerks often find a companion really useful to turn and whisper to, even if just to take the pressure off when stuck for what to do next, or to check a leading.
  
- Reign in or settle a very over-eager clerk; ditto for a clerk on a short fuse today. How? Why? Well, new clerks sometimes have big ideas for change; sometimes that's excellent, sometimes there was a good reason for the old way – worth waiting a month or two before changing too radically, too soon. Short fuse? Just be ready to be grumbled at – don't take it personally and find some way of lightening things if you can. A hand on the arm if things are getting tense, or a suggestion calling for some silence during the meeting. Love your clerk.
  
- Protect a clerk from eager Friends approaching at the wrong moment. How? One tip is to have an empty cardboard file and ask those approaching to scribble a note and place it in the file. It can sit ready on the clerk's table during business meetings too. The perfect assistant clerk can sometimes unobtrusively intervene and engage the Friend themselves.

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- Be prepared to step up to clerking at no notice; be prepared to fade into the background until needed. How? Try and have the mindset that can put the ego somewhere else for now and be available to serve, either in the 'limelight' or by fading into the background. Both at once is tricky.
- Pray the agenda with the clerk in the shared preparation of business; be a dots-and-commas committee for the minutes afterwards and be ready to debrief or reflect on how a meeting went; be available for the clerk to consult between meetings ...
- Second-guess what the clerk wants NOW. Actually, that's impossible.

You only realise how essential assistant clerks are when there isn't one sitting at the table. In the end, it comes down to the relationship between the two clerks – aim to complement each other's gifts (for example, one is the big picture person and the other is good at detail.) Always seek to have trust in each other.

What does an assistant clerk do that I haven't thought of?

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